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**I am Pouring Sweet Water on my Altar for You:  
Theorizing Women of Color Feminism at the Junctures of Storm/water, Femininity,  
Race and Power**

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**I am Pouring Sweet Water on my Altar for You:  
Theorizing Women of Color Feminism at the Junctures of Storm/water, Femininity,  
Race and Power**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

There is an unexploded land mine heart in us  
under every breast chest  
waiting for breath  
tears a moan  
to crack the land open  
and let the stories come walking  
out of the scar

-Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

*for Shaun Rosario.*

*Yemoja keep you, hold you, cradle you home.*

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## **Abstract**

### **I am Pouring Sweet Water on my Altar for You:**

### **Theorizing Women of Color Feminism at the Junctures of Storm/water, Femininity, Race and Power**

Natassja Bindu Gunasena, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley

This thesis is a meditation on the womanness of water and the wateriness of black and brown womanness. It begins with a consideration of those women that were swept away in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in Sri Lanka and those women who were engulfed by the rage of Hurricane Katrina nine months later. As such, this thesis is also a consideration of waterscapes of origin, of the pitfalls and potentials of women of color connecting through, with and *as* water. It names Yemoja, Oshun, Erzulie, Pattini and Viharamahadevi as theories of water, gender and race developed by women whose lives are “writ in water”, and it names them *as* flesh-and-blood women who wrest/ed meaning from materiality. And finally, this thesis is my own praxis of “crossing”, my response to M.Jacqui Alexander’s call to “water the plantain shoots” and to remember what we have forgotten we’ve forgotten. It is a navigation of the waters of women of color feminism, anchored first and always in Black feminism, that hopes to chart a new future where the bridge isn’t only our back, but our hands, our tongues, and our hearts.

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## Chapter 1: Lotus in the Bayou: *Feminine Waterscapes of New Orleans and Sri Lanka*

*“To whom do I flee and where? To whom do you flee? Had I not already earned the right to belong?”* - M.Jacqui Alexander

*“Two world-less girls found a country in each other’s arms. Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility.”* Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*

*“Bring me li'l water, Silvy.*

*Bring me li'l water now.*

*Bring me li'l water, Silvy,*

*every li'l once in a while.”*

- Sweet Honey in the Rock, *Sylvie*

The first book I read in graduate school was *Lose your Mother*, and the title terrified me. Since childhood I had nursed a deep horror at the thought of losing my biological mother. She raised me and my brother mostly alone, left her birth country to seek work and more opportunities for her children in a land that disparaged South Asian women, and embodied always a kind of femininity, grace and fierceness that I could only hope to emulate. As a woman of color academic, I also aspired to specific, intellectual mothers whose work had seen me through five alienating years in a small Minnesota college: Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga. I arrived at graduate school confident in an intellectual trajectory of mestizaje and woman-of-color solidarity, ready

to theorize “Brown women” and our sexual, cultural, creative interventions. And so the idea of being unmoored from maternal legacies, of losing the mothers around whom I had fashioned my identity politics, felt untenable, devastating.

Invoking Audre Lorde’s call to “water the plantain shoots,” M.Jacqui Alexander writes of traditions of survival among women of color in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*, and reminds us that “plantain shoots are tricky because the young can choke out the mother, or the mother can choke out the young.”<sup>1</sup> I came to understand that the through-line between mother and daughter is rarely legible, is often bloody and blurry with historical waters. When two tsunamis surged ashore Sri Lanka in 2004, over 15,000 women, mostly mothers carrying children, trapped in kitchens, ensnared by long hair, swallowed salt water and never breathed again. Less than nine months later, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, and it was mostly working-class Black women, also mothers, carrying children and elders and food rations, watching busloads of the lucky drive past them, that bore the brunt of the disaster. How do we contend with the reality that motherhood, and womanhood, for these women is a dangerous, “fugitive” state?<sup>2</sup> That the lessons they might have imparted to their daughters would not have saved them? Many of the women Alexander honors in this work - Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa - are dead from illnesses that have their roots in a political economy that over-exploits the labor of Black and Brown women. And what of their dreams of a radical women of color collective, dreams that remain unfinished and perhaps even, increasingly, unwanted? These questions require complex answers that might find mothers and daughters on opposite shores, listening for memories of each other in the water and the wind, struggling to balance the

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham [N.C.: Duke UP, 2005. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. Print.

old and the new with our own subjective desires. There is another thing that scares us when it comes to mothers: disagreeing with them.

The afterlife of slavery cast a peculiar shadow over the lives of Black women in New Orleans, circumscribing the ways in which they could mother, survive and resist. Trapped between the rising waters and a government that seemed indifferent to their plight, “it was low-income African-American women, many single mothers among them, whose pleas for food and water were broadcast around the world from the Superdome.”<sup>3</sup> In the weeks following the hurricane, Black women’s struggle to relocate, salvage and recover in the face of increasing police presence and ineffectual, at times downright negligent, government aid was reminiscent of Saidiya Hartman’s recounting of people fleeing slave traders in eighteenth century Ghana. Dislocated and bereft of land, these fugitives travelled deep into the northwest of Ghana in a desperate search for safety, only to discover “There was no place to run that was far enough away”<sup>4</sup>. There were few places that impoverished Black women could run to when the waters rose, and even fewer places willing to harbor them afterwards, and although many women fiercely disavowed the term, the fugitive nature of their lives rendered them, ultimately, refugees within their own land<sup>5</sup>.

In a 2006 report funded by the United Nations, Neloufer De Mel and Kanchana Ruwanpura trace the many displacements and relocations that Sri Lankan Tamil women had already experienced prior to the tsunami. Writing that “Displacement is nothing new to Sri Lanka”, they note that many Tamil women were simply moved from wartime refugee shelters to tsunami victim shelters, and that still others faced anew the loss of

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<sup>3</sup> David, Emmanuel. *The Women of Katrina: How Gender, Race, and Class Matter in an American Disaster*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2012. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Hartman 211

<sup>5</sup> Trethewey, Natasha D., and Natasha D. Trethewey. *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. Athens: U of Georgia, 2010. Print.

their homes, livelihood and families<sup>6</sup>. Several women living in the warzone also claimed that the rushing of the tsunami water sounded to their ears like thundering fighter jets as they scrambled to find shelter. For these women, fear and loss were but another layer of entrenched and historical reality.

And the complicated and complicating bond between mothers and daughters is vital to understand the cultural nexus within which each disaster occurred. “Tsunami” was not a familiar word to Sri Lankans on the island prior to 2004, but a story that dates back centuries tells of waves that came ashore and nearly drowned a kingdom. The epic chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, tells how the King of the beautiful river-kingdom Kelaniya discovered his wife’s infidelity and unjustly slew a messenger carrying a letter from her lover. This angered the gods who in turn caused the sea to rush inland and storms to rage overhead. To appease the celestial powers and save his people, the King was forced to pay a tribute: his daughter - the brave and virtuous Princess Devi - was sent downriver in a golden boat into the arms of the tsunami. Satisfied with the tribute, the waves receded and the skies grew clear, and today Devi is honored by the title Viharamahadevi and remembered as the mother-goddess of the Sinhala Buddhist nation. In the northern, Tamil-majority provinces it is Kadalacti Amman, goddess of the sea, around whom the grief and loss of local communities coalesce. Said to have come ashore on Navalady with her two sisters Kali and Pecci, this triple goddess represents the “three faces of *sakti* - the sacred, active female energy in the universe.”<sup>7</sup> Village elders recall seeing a mysterious white-clad woman the day before the Boxing Day tsunami, wandering the seashore and warning villagers about the coming water. After the tsunami, the statue of Kadalatci

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<sup>6</sup> De Mel, Neloufer, and Kanchana N. Ruwanpura. *Gendering the tsunami: Women's experiences from Sri Lanka*. International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2006. Print. 22

<sup>7</sup> McGilvray, Dennis B., and Michele R. Gamburd, eds. *Tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka: Ethnic and Regional Dimensions*. Routledge, 2013. Print

Amman was found dislodged and swept away from its shrine with her four hands severed from her arms.

While hurricanes are more vividly recent in the memory of New Orleans, Katrina proved a force that would redefine history. As the city waited for floodwaters that seemed never to recede, and help from the government that never came, there were whispers of a ghost, a woman, weeping on the steps of the French Quarter. The woman was Marie Laveau, Voodoo priestess, businesswoman and arguably the *metisse* face of New Orleans, who in the minds of practitioners remains linked both to Yemaya and her sister-orisha Oshun, as well as the Haitian lwa Erzulie Freda. When Katrina's gale-force winds dented the roof of the superdome, rumors spread that it was built on the true resting place of Marie Laveau and that it was her wrath that struck fear into the huddled refugees inside. Today her gravesite in the French Quarter is still frequented by locals and tourists drawn to the mysterious allure of her historical power as well as by practitioners of Vodoun, Santeria and Ifa. The tomb is surrounded by offerings of jewelry, coins and flowers, its face marked with X's made by those who entreated Laveau with wishes. And though history gives her no venerable title, the offerings collect everyday at her grave like children at their mother's feet. Simply put, we cannot understand Sinhalese, Tamil and Creole women's relationship to oceans and rivers today without visiting these historical and contemporary linkages between stormwaters, femininity, desire and power. And if as Omise'eke Tinsley reminds us the Black Atlantic is a "mirror that mirrors queerly", can we look at tsunamis and hurricanes, these overflows of Black and Brown oceans, as queer overflows of history, time and place, mirroring the past onto the present, catching glimpses of our reality in the lives of women who lived centuries ago and who died thousands of miles apart from each other, closing the distance between far-flung things?

But the historical nexus of “terror and pleasure”<sup>8</sup> that awaits women by the seashore complicates any relationship they could have to bodies of water. Tinsley writes of Caribbean “womanscapes” as “an interactive ecology in which the colonized struggle for interpretive power by asserting the right to imagine a geography in which they can live, wash, talk, work, and rest safely.”<sup>9</sup> How do Black and Brown women interact with the oceans and oceanic histories of their material lives? At the height of the transatlantic slave trade, “The first sight of the ocean was often a vision of fear”<sup>10</sup>. The waters of the Atlantic heralded loss and trauma deeper than the roar of the surf. Writers like Fred Aguilar have tried to reimagine the Middle Passage and, in doing so, theorized the slippage between Black bodies and salt water that makes the ocean always already a project of painful materiality and ongoing trauma. For Sri Lankan women the island’s location and accessibility, facilitated by the waters of the Indian Ocean, has meant being targeted by maritime adventurers and merchant enterprises as well as military interests. Two of Sri Lanka’s most famous hotels - Mount Lavinia Hotel and Galle Face Hotel - are in fact colonial governors’ mansions transformed into luxury venues, white-columned facades overlooking those historically coveted sapphire-blue waters.

These oceans, the Atlantic and the Indian, are “sites of colonization” where race and gender engulf particular marked bodies, and where the unmarked is given meaning *through* race and gender. Tinsley reminds us that the bleeding, oozing bodies of captive slaves onboard slave ships were among the first of these “sites”, that the “liquidation” of Black bodies, the dissolving of Blackness into chattel, was the seascape of imperialism.

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<sup>8</sup> Saidiya Hartman. “Venus in Two Acts”. *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 1-14. *Project MUSE*. Web. 7 Oct. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Tinsley, Omise’eke Natasha. *Thieving sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Print. 18

<sup>10</sup> Tinsley, Omise’eke Natasha. “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic-Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage”. *GLQ-A JOURNAL OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES* 14.2-3 (2008): 191-215.

In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock charts the gendering of colonial landscapes through reading H. Rider Haggard's sexualized treasure map of King Solomon's mines: "the explicitly sexualized" map outlines a riverine silhouette, mountain-breasts, and strategic cavities through which the treasure seeking white men can both enter and exit, provided of course that they kill the "Black witch-mother" inside<sup>11</sup>. This simple but startling illustration of a "libidinal economy" is premised on the (social) death of a Black body, specifically a feminized Black body. McClintock continues, pointing to Christopher Columbus' speculation about the earth being shaped like a woman's breast, the tip of which he was slowly sailing towards. Here "the female body is figured as marking the boundary of the cosmos and the limits of the known world, enclosing the ragged men, with their dreams of pepper and pearls, in her indefinite oceanic body." Chattel slavery then was a kind of apex of colonization, with Black bodies becoming wealth, becoming violently transubstantiated from metaphor to fungible property. And while colonization likewise extracted labor from feminized brown bodies in Sri Lanka - for instance under British rule, tea-plantation workers were largely poor, Tamil women - as well as other sites of western empire, it's important to remember Haggard's map, to reorient ourselves in the opaque, shifting, material, originary site of colonization that is the Black female body. If we could draw a different kind of map here, then the chattelization of Black womanness would be a sea from which the colonization of brown women in places like Sri Lanka flow vein-like outward, a rich bay of violently accrued imperial wealth both connecting and separating the various shores of empire.

Walking in the shadow of these histories, how can a Black or Brown woman lay claim to any seashore? What history moves unseen in the waters she bathes and drinks

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<sup>11</sup> McClintock

from? How do seashores and riverbanks become materially transformed into Black and Brown womanscapes? And how do these women speak that transformation into being through their bodies, their work, their lives, their desires? In the groundbreaking article *The Race for Theory*, Barbara Christian argues that people of color, and particularly women of color, theorize in ways that allow for the shifting complexities of our lives. She writes:

“...And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world. It is this language, and the grace and pleasure with which they played with it, that I find celebrated, refined, critiqued in the works of writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory-though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.”<sup>12</sup>

I invoke Christian here to underwrite the necessity of implicating myself in the theorizing, to assert that a woman of color project that makes no account for the self, the body, the “sensual” alongside the “abstract”, is an incomplete one. This is not to say that all theory without personal insight into the theorizer is useless, but rather we must strive to interrogate the machinations of power in the quotidian, we must wrestle with the impulse to self-negate as a response to the totalizing operations of the state. When we overcome the compulsion to remain conduits of theory and instead bring our daily, erotic, fleshly knowledges to the act of unmasking power, we can arrive at shores both intimate

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<sup>12</sup> Christian, Barbara. “The Race For Theory”. *Cultural Critique* (1987): 51-63.



and insightful, new and ancestral, personal and political .<sup>13</sup> This work began as an academic endeavor rooted in my lifelong passion for the sea, but in order to break the surface I had to embrace - politically, socially, sensually - my love for Black and Brown women. This love for women of color means I take seriously the ways in which they speak their world into being through bodily work, stories, cosmology. It means theorizing in a way that makes many different crossings possible. And it means choosing my anchors carefully.

The tides have changed since *This Bridge Called my Back* sounded a rallying cry for women of color and Third World women. As Alexander, herself a pioneer of transnational, multiracial feminist alliances, notes in *Pedagogies*, the phrase “women of color” has never before been called to encapsulate so many women with so few words. The (tenuous) establishment of Ethnic Studies and Gender Studies programs and the rise of the feminist blogosphere have brought varied voices to bear on categories of race, class, gender and sexuality. Anti-blackness and settler colonialism trouble the waters of cross-racial alliances, while the “Third World” must reckon with its own internal contradictions in the wake of India’s ruthless embracing of neo-liberalism, Chinese imperialism in southern Africa, and Sri Lanka’s massacre of its Tamil population. How can the term “women of color” help us navigate such turbulent waters? What kind of course would the language of alliance and solidarity chart? What shores would we travel to? And if the discourse of Blackness and Brownness and Third-Worldness would mire us, if the hands of the ocean - in their shifting, fluid, heavy, “multiblued” capacity - are the only ones capable of holding us, then how do we stay, hold each other up, let go of what needs releasing, close our eyes and plunge deep?<sup>14</sup> How do we learn to swim?

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<sup>13</sup> IBID

<sup>14</sup> Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic-Queer imaginings of the middle passage." *GLQ-A JOURNAL OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES* 14, no. 2-3 (2008): 191-215.

Alexander reiterates that “We are not born women of color. We *become* women of color. In order to become women of color, we would need to become fluent in each others’ histories.”<sup>15</sup> Fluency is the necessary first step, yes, but our commitments must run deeper, must acknowledge the way we have used silence and exclusion against each other, and concede the variegated dispersion of power in a racial economy. In *People-of-color-blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery*, Jared Sexton identifies a trend in liberal racial discourse as “*people-of-color-blindness*, a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of ‘people of color’ to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of anti-Blackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy — thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others.”<sup>16</sup> The line of reasoning that erases the specificity of racial slavery is as historically amnesiac as it is politically short-sighted. In a 2011 interview, Loretta Ross, founder of Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective reminds us that it was Black women’s articulation of a political agenda that underwrote the term “women of color”<sup>17</sup>. And while feminisms of color proliferate in the academic landscape, their roots remain in the analyses offered by Lorde, Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill-Collins, and the Combahee River Collective to name a few. Or as transpinay blogger b. binaohan writes about the phrase “people of color” : “using this term fundamentally *requires* that you act in solidarity with Black women (and people). that you work on your anti-Blackness.”<sup>18</sup> In

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander, 269

<sup>16</sup> Sexton, Jared. “People-of-Color-Blindness Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery”. *Social Text* 28.2 103 (2010): 31-56.

<sup>17</sup> Ross, Loretta. *The Origin of the Phrase ‘Women of Color’*. Western States Center. 15 Feb 2011. Video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82v134mi4lw>

<sup>18</sup> b.binaohan. *once more with ‘poc’ erasing difference*. 17 October 2014 <http://xd.binaohan.org/post/100255058070/once-more-with-poc-erasing-differences>

other words, to identify as a person of color, as a woman of color, *must* entail a fluency in the history of the Black diaspora and the formations of chattel slavery.

Alexander navigates these ideas in the chapter called Remembering “This Bridge Called my Back, Remembering Ourselves” through a reflection on her own trajectory as a Black Caribbean woman and a transnational woman of color feminist in the United States. Remembering here becomes an active, political effort, a re-membering and re-tooling that insists on histories of resistance even as it looks ahead to newer shores. On her fraught experiences building solidarity with African-American women she writes “The memory of slavery has receded in the lived experience of Caribbean people; colonization has greater force. The memory of colonization has receded in the lived experience of African-American people; it is slavery that has carried historical weight.”<sup>19</sup> And the weight we all carry - the psychic, the historical, the material weight - marks the difference between life and death when the waves rise and the winds blow. A long and complex history of colonization had organized women’s life on the Sri Lankan seashore, life that was so brutally and simply swept away within the span of a few minutes. Meanwhile the persistent afterlife of slavery structured the realities of those who had no way out when Katrina came ashore. Gender, race and class are weighted with “Sedimented layers of experience” that are never easily dislodged but linger and cling like mud after floodwater<sup>20</sup>. To speak through and between them is messy but necessary and ultimately life-saving work.

What we must remember is that water soothes and conjoins, but also drowns, destroys and kills. That is to say our projects of re-memory must remain attuned to the “historical weight” we carry, that was unwittingly bequeathed by our mothers, that

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<sup>19</sup> Alexander, 271

<sup>20</sup> Tinsley, 26

we use as shields and weapons in our daily struggle for self-actualization. What would it mean to remember in order to reconnect? To recover those places where the waters of different histories flow together? Folk healers in the Democratic Republic of Congo practice a ritual called water-gazing: a way of looking into the depths of water until they see mirrored there the atrocities and traumas suffered by those in their communities. Once the images are conjured, the entire community is called to witness their shared and tangled history in the depths of the water. “Water always remembers” as Alexander reminds us, and like the practice of water gazing, the woman of color solidarity she invokes is never given to easy fluidity, but rather requires active, painful, work, learning and *unlearning* languages, making creative, courageous space for all of our weighted sorrows.<sup>21</sup>

And when we talk of fluency, what languages do we call upon? Alexander’s work deals in three; the first, explicated above, is the language of engaged remembering, the second is that of recognition. “We have recognized each other before” she says of solidarity between women of color, and must do so again<sup>22</sup>. Our challenge then is to foreground interconnection without erasing specificity, to identify and recognize that our struggles are situated within the same system of coercive hegemony, but that they are differentially situated and this difference attests to the ingenuity of power just as it calls us to be creative, inventive and dynamic in our resistance. We must perceive our common interests and also allow for convergences, for the engendering of a world of possibilities through our varied desires. And we must acknowledge the ways we have wounded and been wounded as well as how we have healed and been healed. We

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander, 285

<sup>22</sup> Alexander, 273

have recognized each other before, in a turbulent moment across turbulent waters, and we can remember how to do so again.

The third tongue is yearning, what Alexander calls “yearning for each other’s company”. I read yearning here as a political imperative, one that calls us as women of color to direct our energies, our resources and our passions towards ourselves and towards each other. In *A Time to Hole Up And a Time to Kick Ass*, queer Sri Lankan poet Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes:

What counts as activism? Why didn’t the kind of emotional self-care me and my girls were doing—talking to each other about all the fucked-up shit we were going through as brown girls—count? Why didn’t my best friend driving her elderly East African mother to the doctor and re-negotiating her way through the layers of the racist, sexist, condescending bullshit medical system count as activism? Did staying alive count as activism?<sup>23</sup>

Throughout her work Piepzna-Samarasinha foregrounds the intersection of politics and passion that characterize women of color coming together. Love is not simply an emotional resonance but a political choice, a dedicated ordering of our lives to center the queer, the brown, the feminine. In the same way, our politics are not contained in manifestos and banners but articulated in our quotidian practices of living, loving and healing. This “yearning” that Alexander highlights then is also queer, not necessarily sexual desire but queer as in a “praxis of resistance.”<sup>24</sup> And finally, this yearning is also erotic, is that which Audre Lorde theorized as “those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest in each of us, being shared: the

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<sup>23</sup> Berger, Melody. *We Don’t Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the next Generation of Feminists*. Emeryville, CA: Seal :, 2006. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Tinsley, 10

passions of love, in its deepest meanings.”<sup>25</sup> To “continue to dare yearning” is an act of queer, erotic and political resistance, one that refuses the divisive logics of a white, heteronormative state, one that offers interstitial glimpses of possibility.<sup>26</sup> And certainly this yearning is a necessary compass for crossing, spiritually, politically and methodologically.

From a methodological standpoint, this means we must “reassemble that which appears to be disparate, scattered or otherwise idiosyncratic.”<sup>27</sup> Tinsley likens theorizing African women’s lives in the Black, queer Atlantic to collecting scattered pieces of world-making as lovingly and carefully as collecting pieces of conch on the beach. In a chapter of *Lose your Mother* Hartman uses cowrie shells to construct a material history of chattelized, often mutilated bodies, and Alexander devotes the last two chapters of her text to reassembling the supposedly “disparate” realms of the sacred, the scholarly and the personal. Each theorist engages in an act of gathering, collecting, assembling and re-constructing. Shells and salt and spirits that linger beyond a linear conception of time might seem “idiosyncratic” objects and forces with which to theorize, but if we are to heed Alexander it is this reassembly that will ultimately offer a challenge to hegemony. Thus a woman of color theorist is at once an interlocutor, ethnographer, creative artist and perhaps even diviner, gathering the “disparate” and the “scattered”, reaching across time and history with a consistent “yearning for each other’s company”. To theorize oceanic histories and realities means acknowledging the fluidity and transformative power of water even as it becomes, in Tinsley’s words, “a force against our hands.” We must remain attentive not only to how water connects and conflates but to the subtle changes in temperature, color and coral according to the geographic region it flows

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<sup>25</sup> Lorde, Audre. *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Random House LLC, 2012. Print

<sup>26</sup> Alexander, 278

<sup>27</sup> Alexander, 192

through. Because to “re-assemble” is never to flatten or collapse difference, but to gather and imagine and yearn and create. To raise the shell to our ears. To listen.

And water, bodies of water, contain a unique and complex matrix of memory, cosmology and materiality. The marriage of water and femininity is not only metaphorical but grounded in ecological and economic realities. Working with water has long been the province of African (descended) and Sri Lankan women, whether walking long miles to gather water for the household, washing clothes at the riverbank, wading in the sea to gather shells and coral or boiling and purifying the family’s drinking water. In their report, De Mel and Ruwanpura compiled a list of gendered labor that left coastal Sri Lankan women vulnerable to the tsunami:

“One reason points to women’s labor outside of their homes on Sunday morning...women like Farida Sithy of Poonachimoonai, Batticola, were washing pots and pans outside at the well, or like Lalitha Premarathne at the beach with her son-in-law engaged in coral mining....The waves crashed on shore at a time of day in Sri Lanka, when many villages hold such markets known as polas...In the coastal areas these polas take place at the intersections...that parallel the coastline, and many women gather there not only to market but also to sell their produce...”<sup>28</sup>

Aside from labor, gendered notions of modesty - fear that straddling a tree trunk might cause a sari to come loose, long skirts that slowed you down - also proved fatal. In the north-eastern regions of the island where the decades long civil war had ensued, remnants of barbed wire from military fencing trapped and drowned women by snagging

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<sup>28</sup> De Mel and Ruwanpura, 36

their long hair.<sup>29</sup> In New Orleans, the gendered and racialized nature of poverty trapped women in floodwater as fiercely as barbed wire:

“Most of the survivors trapped in the dying city are women. Women with children, women on their own, elderly women in wheelchairs, women everywhere. Women account for 54% of the population of New Orleans...The surviving victims of this hurricane are mostly African-American women, and no doubt the ranks of the dead will be also...In the days ahead of the storm a lot of people did get out of New Orleans, almost all of them by car...Of all Americans, it is poor African-American women who are the least likely of all to have a car or access to one.”<sup>30</sup>

While the tsunami surged ashore with no warning, meteorologists had tracked Katrina for weeks, and still the vulnerability of poor, Black women was unabated. Clearly, the presence of advanced technologies meant little in the face of entrenched anti-Black racism and classism as the deadly floodwaters obscured arbitrary categories of ‘first world’ and ‘third world’ to reveal, simply, the disposability Black bodies. Plain and inexorable materiality bound these women to the waters of a tsunami and a hurricane, and while we often employ watery metaphors for evoking feminine, queer, desiring bodies, any conceptual fluidities we might envision are foreclosed by (mate)realities of gender, race and class. That is to say, there is no accounting for the cosmological and symbolic iterations of water without also incorporating the material weight it carries.

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<sup>29</sup> De Mel and Ruwanpura, 37

<sup>30</sup> David and Enarson, 9-8



Materiality is also memory, carried and held in bodies of water. Anissa Janine Wardi theorizes this phenomenon in *Water and African American Memory: an Ecocritical Perspective* when she writes that “water holds memory...Since water is not a renewable resource, it follows that every molecule of every droplet of water in existence today has always been there, recording all of our acts upon the globe.”<sup>31</sup> Water bodies are thus receptacles of memory much like feminine bodies, vessels of cultural and social remembering<sup>32</sup>. As Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith remind us, “What a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender...[and] the cultural tropes and codes through which a culture represents its past are also marked by gender, race, and class.”<sup>33</sup> Water and the feminine become linked in both memory and forgetting; people remember the glory of a princess miraculously calming the waves, not the terror of a young girl forced to pay for her father’s crimes; they remember a glamorous and sensual woman who ruled the city of New Orleans with her powers, not the fraught landscape of race and gender she navigated in order to retain her freedom and humanity. The ocean and bodies that labor alongside it are continuously mapped into a patriarchal, racist imaginary that excises their creative and courageous forms of historical as well as contemporary resistance. But water always remembers, and in this remembering insists that we engage the constellation of materiality, cosmology and history that informs women’s relationship to water.

The precarious entanglement of femininity, water and colonialism is not only evident in living human bodies, but in local ecologies. For example, at first glance water hyacinths appear as beautiful, elegant mermaid-like flowers, but are in fact one of the

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<sup>31</sup> Wardi, Anissa Janine. *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*. University Press of Florida, 2011. 9

<sup>32</sup> I use the phrase ‘water bodies’ purposefully to invoke these sites as materially entangled, gendered and historicized much like women’s bodies.

<sup>33</sup> Hirsch, Marianne, and Valerie Smith. “Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction”. *Signs* 28.1 (2002): 1-19.

deadliest aquatic weeds in the world, with roots that can choke oxygen out of water and petals that breed deadly disease-bearing mosquitoes. Wardi writes, “Beauty’s relationship to death bears particular weight in the history of Louisiana’s bayous. Bayou waters are ‘covered and choked’ by water hyacinths, also known as ‘orchids of the bayou.’”<sup>34</sup> Despite their fragile appearance, and being composed of little more than water, these lavender-colored blossoms and their leaves can carpet a lake floor so thickly as to forestall motorboats. To poison them is to poison the entire body of water, to leave them unattended is to concede that body to slow, thick, blue-petalled corruption. Salt is the only antidote to this flower born in the Amazon basin and carried to New Orleans and Sri Lanka in colonial hands ( the water hyacinth was introduced to the United States via the 1884 World Fair in New Orleans, and later to Sri Lanka by the wife of British governor Blake in 1909), and all it needs is a body of freshwater to take tenacious root. I evoke the water hyacinth here to theorize the sticky, bountiful, suffocating, diasporic, amphibian realities of Black and Brown womanhood as they live and survive by the bayous of New Orleans and the seashores of Galle, Hikkaduwa and Trincomalee. I evoke it because it serves as a thread connecting Sri Lanka to New Orleans in a complex historical tapestry. I evoke it because I want us to consider the seeming incongruity of “terror and pleasure”<sup>35</sup> as they converge on water bodies as well as women's bodies, because long hair and flowing saris and barbed wire can pull you under and make you breathe water, because when all the buses and trains and cars and helicopters leave, you have no choice to but to stay in the water and breathe what air you can, because beauty and femininity in these sites are always already historically fraught and swampified by a white patriarchal imaginary and yet remain alive, surviving, necessary, breathtaking. These deadly yet

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<sup>34</sup> Wardi, 91

<sup>35</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 1-14. *Project MUSE*. Web. 7 Oct. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.

insistently blossoming flowers are a fitting metaphor for the treacherously lush landscapes of femininity that Black and Brown women must negotiate and I evoke it because I want to consider this: must the connections between Black and Brown women be always only mired in colonialism, destruction and death, or can they be something else too, something complicatedly beautiful that, despite its illegibility to the hegemonic, flowers simply and thickly into riotous existence?

And what historical and cultural precedents connect these women to water-bound realities? In her essay *Waters of Desire*, Chandani Lokuge opens a vein of Sri Lankan historical and cultural consciousness to find an abundance of water.

“If Earth is the water planet, Sri Lanka is the water-island. Water is an obsessively volatile physical force within and surrounding the island. In its depths co-exist the various dualities of creation and destruction: devastating droughts and floods, hope-renewing monsoons, and the tsunami...and the Mahavamsa, the earliest chronicle of the island’s history, unfolds a number of stories on water.”<sup>36</sup>

Like New Orleans, Sri Lanka is mothered by both oceans and rivers. Historically referred to as the “pearl of the Indian Ocean”, the teardrop-shaped island is also plentifully supplied with fresh water. With some of the world’s earliest hydraulic systems, a centuries old tradition of stilt fishing and water-based rituals that permeate aspects of cultural life, Sri Lanka is as materially embedded in water as it is metaphorically implicated. Young Devi, princess of a river kingdom, became known as Viharamahadevi, great goddess of the shrine, after she braved and survived tsunami

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<sup>36</sup> Lokuge, Chandani. “Waters of Desire”. *Meanjin* 66.2 (2007): 25.

waves<sup>37</sup>. She is accompanied by Kadalcti Amman, the four-armed sea goddess who supposedly tried to warn her devotees about the coming tsunami, and Pattini Amman, the milk-mother, goddess of prosperity and fertility and guardian against disease<sup>38</sup>. Both Sinhalese and Tamil communities worship Pattini Amman, appealing to her powers of balance and wealth to provide rain water during drought, and to calm the overflow of monsoon floods<sup>39</sup>. If Viharamahadevi emblemizes virtuous Buddhist motherhood, then Kadalcti and Pattini are the vestigial deities of indigenous, Tamil and folk practices that teem alongside Sri Lanka's nationalist, Sinhala-Buddhist ideology. However, unlike the triumphalism of Devi's story, Kadalcti and Pattini exist in the cyclical space of transgenerational, entrenched materialisms fostered by war, genocide and poverty. Their worship is bound up in communal relationships to water that might shift with the forces of human action but never lose their vital necessity to human life.

For both Sri Lanka and New Orleans, these cosmologies of water weaving complexly between memory and materiality offer a unique mode of theorizing. And to speak of hurricanes and tsunamis is to inevitably invoke the kinship of the Black diasporic orishas Yemoja and Oshun, where sweet water meets the salt, sometimes in chaos and sometimes in pleasure, and always with a power that changes entire landscapes. These cosmological interventions into water, rooted as they are in the memory and material weight of women's lives, also rely on the transformative, syncretic quality of water to remember, recognize and yearn. Yemoja became the orisha of saltwaters with the advent of the Middle Passage, when enslaved Black men and women who managed to break free leapt overboard into her waiting arms<sup>40</sup>. She is also said to

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<sup>37</sup> Muller, Carl. *Children of the Lion*. New Delhi, India: Viking, 1997. Print.

<sup>38</sup> McGilvray and Gamburd, 150

<sup>39</sup> Obeyesekere, Gananath. *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*. Chicago, Illinois: U of Chicago, 1984. Print.

<sup>40</sup> Otero, Solimar. *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diasporas*. Albany: SUNY, 2013. Print.

have gathered those bodies considered damaged goods that slavers threw into the sea, the ailing children, the pregnant women, women who were raped, women who said no, women who said yes, women who dared to say anything, women who dreamed. In the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, Yemoja presides over mothering in all its forms, over queer and same-gender loving folk, over the dreamers and creators, the warriors and poets and all those who look to the deep memory of the ocean for a glimpse of themselves. Oshun her sister also followed her to the New World, bringing honey for the mouths of children bred on salt<sup>41</sup>. Carrying a mirror and fan of peacock feathers that her devotees swish in regal imitation of a peacock's dance, Oshun and her Haitian counterpart Ezili Freda flourish sweetly in those interstitial spaces of Black women's creative and sensual worldmaking, reminding their worshippers of the transformative power of desire. One could say of Marie Laveau and the city of New Orleans that they are daughters of Oshun and Yemoja, children of two waters mixing salt and sweet in their daily acts of survival. Water transforms, it "mirrors queerly", and learning the languages of transformation is vital for telling (her)stories of women of color in disparate locations.<sup>42</sup>

Alexander concludes her meditative chapter on *This Bridge Called my Back* by remembering and honoring a departed woman of color feminist, a mother of words and theory: Gloria Anzaldúa. Lamenting Anzaldúa's premature death from diabetes, she identifies a space in which Black and Chicana women might reach across disparate experiences to find a common space of mourning, remembering, recognition and yearning. This space, an altar space - dynamic, interstitial, changing, accumulative - is the space in which I locate my work. The building of shrines and altars in Black and Brown

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<sup>41</sup> Murphy, Joseph M. *Ọṣun across the Waters a Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001. Print

<sup>42</sup> Tinsley, 202

diasporic traditions is an assemblative form of theorizing indexing, memory, materiality and cosmology to produce something “sensual and abstract...beautiful and communicative.”<sup>43</sup> Donald J. Cosentino writes of Vodoun altars:

To look at a Vodoun altar cluttered with sequinned whisky bottles, satin pomanders, clay pots dressed in lace, plaster statues of St. Anthony and the laughing Buddha, holy cards, political kitsch, Dresden clocks, bottles of Moët and Chandon, rosaries, crucifixes, wooden phalluses, goat skulls, Christmas tree ornaments and Arawak celts is to gauge the achievement of slaves and freedmen who imagined a narrative broad enough and fabricated a ritual complex enough to encompass all this disparate stuff.<sup>44</sup>

At once “broad” and “complex”, the altar is capacious enough for multiple symbols and icons and also capable of holding “disparate stuff” within a common, but not conflative, space. It is altar logics that underwrite Alexander’s work in *Pedagogies*, a book she dedicates to Yemaya. Containing seven chapters (Yemaya’s number in Santeria, Lucumi and Ifa), the book begins by invoking the crossroads just as rituals begin first by praising Eshu, guardian of the crossroads and mediator between the worlds of spirit and of flesh, and concludes with a chapter that assembles the sacred, the spiritual and the material into a complex theory of crossing and healing. The theory of altars, a theory that thousands of Black and Brown women create and recreate daily in their work, resistance and survival, is one that challenges us to cross epistemological and disciplinary

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<sup>43</sup> Christian, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Cosentino, Donald J. “On Looking at a Vodou Altar”. *African Arts* (1996): 67-70.

boundaries to generate necessary and complex dialogues. In a poem dedicated to the Iraqi people, written at the beginning of the US invasion of Iraq, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes:

And no I'm not marching to the consulate today  
I stay home light another candle  
I don't have any gun to fight them with  
except my tongue my heart  
I am pouring sweet water on my altar for you  
knowing that this prayer is all I can do  
and remembering  
survivors survive  
whether they want us to  
or not<sup>45</sup>

Her altar allows her, a queer woman of color poet, located in the global north with roots in Sri Lanka, descended from genocide survivors and now building community with Black and Brown queers, to invoke a warrior lesbian poet - Audre Lorde - in praying for the lives of Brown women in another country. This woman of color feminism she invokes is as visible in spaces of public political protest as it in private, or rather, its presence at rallies and marches is always already commensurate with the intimate, sacred cultivation of "feeling and feeling for" that appears in the poem.<sup>46</sup> It is fire that features in the devastation here - the fire of grenades and missiles and the fiery thirst in the throats of refugees and war prisoners - and water that offers hope, sweetness, love and prayer. Through the pouring of water, a practice as common to worshippers of Kali and Pattini as

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<sup>45</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Consensual Genocide*. TSAR Publications, 2006. 68

<sup>46</sup> Tinsley, 3

to those of Yemoja and Oshun, the poet evokes a foremother, remembering the power of her words and working them to make sense of a contemporary tragedy. And what space but an altar could not only contain, but conceptualize, sweet water and salt, Kali, Oshun, Yemaya and Pattini, *sakti* and *ase*, water hyacinths, Marie Laveau, Viharamahadevi, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and the grief of lost homes and unrecovered bodies?

Sonali Deraniyagala, author of the award winning tsunami memoir *Wave*, describes the act of writing her novel as “a better quality of agony” than grief<sup>47</sup>. After losing her husband, two young sons, parents and best friend to the wave, Deraniyagala battled suicidal depression and alcoholism before finally discovering a grief counselor who urged her to write down her experiences. Curiously, the book speaks less about the incomprehensibility of the tsunami than it does about the life Deraniyagala used to share with her family, the meals they cooked, the daily rituals that structured their time, the car rides from school and work, the holidays of bird watching and swimming in the sea. In an article for the *New Yorker*, Teju Cole says of the book “In accurately describing her family’s life—and I’m drawn here to the root word ‘cura,’ care, from which we get ‘accurate’—she rescues her family from uncaring, careless fate. Losing them plunged her into darkness. Writing about what happened brings them back into the light, a little”.<sup>48</sup> I argue that Deraniyagala’s work is a form of shrine building, gathering and assembling and honoring with words the devastated pieces of her former life while trying to understand the apocalyptic experience of the wave itself. When asked what she would like readers to take away from the book, she replied simply “That love endures.”<sup>49</sup>

In Sri Lankan folk Buddhism they say if you place your altar offerings close to each other your souls will return together in the next life. Whenever my mother and I

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<sup>47</sup> Cole, Teju. A Better Quality of Agony. *The New Yorker*, 27 March 2013. Web. 15 November 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Cole, Teju. IBID

<sup>49</sup> Deraniyagala, Sonali. Interview by Indigo: Chapters. 15 March 2013. Web. 15 November 2014



would go to the temple I would scrunch our flower offerings as close together as possible, wishing with a child's fervor that our souls could somehow hold on to each other across life and death. Belief in the enduring power of love informed my earliest experience with altars, and it is love, and sweet water, and the endurance of Black and Brown women's imaginative, worldmaking capabilities that continue structuring my altar-work today. What prayers would we sing at such an altar, and what would we pray for? In her first recorded song about motherhood, named after her daughter *Blue*, world-famous Black, feminist superstar Beyoncé Knowles-Carter reassures her baby girl that together, they can "last forever"<sup>50</sup>. Filmed in Brazil, the video is resplendently blue with Yemoja imagery as Beyoncé carries her daughter serenely across lush, white beaches, as she dances in Oshun-gold finery with ankles caressed by water, as she holds her child protectively close in a Madonna-and-child tableau of safe, beautiful, Black motherhood. "C'mon baby won't you hold on to me. Hold on to me," she sings, and Blue's baby gurgle replies.<sup>51</sup> When the tsunami came there were mothers who held on, but not tight enough. When the floodwaters rose there were women who made bitter choices about what to hold on to, and what to let go. And a queer, woman of color, diasporic altar-work is held together in the same way, encapsulating loss, marking survival, holding on to hope. Hope of a different future, imagined and imaginatively plotted by our desires and our mothers' dreams, hope that transforms, that remembers sorrow but does not wane. *Hold on to me*, we pray as the waters rise. Hold on.

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<sup>50</sup> Knowles-Carter, Beyoncé. Boot. (2013). *Blue* (featuring Blue Ivy). On *Beyoncé: The Visual Album*. iTunes. Parkwood. Columbia. 13 Dec 2013

<sup>51</sup> IBID

## **Chapter 2: Honey, Fire, Salt: *Women of Color Feminisms and Geographies of Origin***

*“Who were my people? How does one know the stories and histories of one’s people? Where does one learn them?” - M. Jacqui Alexander.*

We call her Yemoja. We call her La Llorona, La Virgen de Regla. We call her Oshun, or Ezilie Freda or La Sirene. We call her Pattini, and Kadalacti. We call her Viharamahadevi. Once flesh and blood and desire, she touches water and becomes devi, becomes spirit, becomes orisha. Feminine water deities have long existed in Black, Chicana and South Asian diasporic cultures, interpellating water and femininity in ways both historically meaningful and resonantly theoretic, urging us to take seriously the ways that women of color have theorized their bodies and their histories through spiritual archives. Altars have multiple uses for water - used in libations, divining, ritual purifications and offerings - and are sometimes even constituted by water. During New Year’s Eve celebrations in Brazil, thousands of offerings to Yemoja are set adrift in the sea. Diyakapeema, or water-cutting, is a ritualized offering and blessing of the river that takes place in Sri Lanka to mark the monsoon seasons. If water is as much constitutive as it is figurative, does the meeting of water and femaleness, of flesh and story, offer transformation or trauma, or both? What does the water absorb of our fleshly stories? And how do those of us that walk on land carry the water in our bodies, histories and memories? What would we rather forget that water insists on remembering? What connections do we need to make that water enables us to see? In this chapter I model altar

building as a theoretical aesthetic by invoking, in simultaneity but not in conflation, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's poem *sweet water 3/19/03* alongside Lisa C. Moore's piece *Denise's Story*<sup>52 53</sup>. What this altar hopes to offer then is a space wide enough, deep enough, "multiblued" enough for many different voices and stories, voices and stories that tread water in their telling, and even, occasionally, spark fire.<sup>54</sup>

To say that an altar formed the centerpiece of an academic conference is rare, and yet this was precisely the case at the 2013 Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas. I was moved and mesmerized by the magnificent draping of red cloth, the multitude of candles, the marigolds and camellias, the bouquets of corn and statuettes of La Virgen De Guadalupe that framed a beautiful, smiling picture of Gloria, but most of all by the diverse array of women of color gathered at the conference whose scholarship and praxis could be described as offerings. The first time I read Anzaldúa and came across her passionate prayer-cries for women of color subjectivity in *Borderlands/La Frontera* I wept with release and cradled the book in my hands, my tears bearing witness to her voice<sup>55</sup>. Years later, even after my scholarship had drifted towards different, distant shores and I could look at her work with a critical, less worshipful eye, I returned to the SGA Conference with my own humble, reverent offering - a paper on diaspora informed by her theories - and encountered a community of women of color, Black and Brown, whose lives like mine were touched by Gloria's work in small but indelible ways. Another woman who remembers Gloria this way is M. Jacqui

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<sup>52</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. 68

<sup>53</sup> "Katrina Survivor Stories." *Katrina Survivor Stories*. Web. 4 May 2015.  
<<http://www.nathanielturner.com/katrinassurvivorstories.htm>>.

<sup>54</sup> Tinsley, 212

<sup>55</sup> A, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.

Alexander, who dedicates a coda to her in *Pedagogies of Crossing* and, in so doing, offers a tenderly bittersweet space for communion, a seeming altar space, between Black and Latina/Chicana women as well as other women of color. In this same vein and at the advent of the Iraqi invasion, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha invokes another women-of-color-feminism ancestor, Audre Lorde, to pray for the impending loss of Iraqi life in her poem *sweet water*, 3/19.03<sup>56</sup>. Survivors survive, she prays in her poem, whether they want us to or not, and Lorde's famous litany is echoed and transformed into a benediction. I invoke the sacred here not as metaphorical shorthand or even as a cultural observation, but rather to have us consider the decolonizing, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, queer work of Black and Brown women as always already a sacred labor. What I mean when I say sacred is not merely the belief in a higher power - although we can learn much from Black and Brown women's theorizing of divine power - but a commitment to transforming material conditions through an interconnected, complex politics of love, through "...the passions of love in its deepest meanings<sup>57</sup>.

This "erotic" power in each of us, writes Lorde, is a fusing of the material, emotional and spiritual, a rootedness that comes from inhabiting the body joyfully and purposefully. Specifically, Lorde decouples the erotic from the pornographic and the spiritual from the ascetic. It is the latter distinction I find most useful for this work. Rather than "reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect", the sacred labor I invoke recognizes the mutuality of affect between the spiritual and the material. That is to say, when Lorde invokes Yemoja, the Black mother who "whispers in our dreams", when

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<sup>56</sup> Lorde, 56

<sup>57</sup> Obeyesekere, 150

Piepzna-Samarasinha pours sweet water for Oshun, when Anzaldúa and Moraga call upon Tonantzin and Coatlicue, they are simultaneously calling forth divine feminine energies to bear witness to their lives and shaping our understanding of these energies through the lenses of materiality<sup>58</sup>. Diasporic altars perform a similar kind of mapping and embodying; altars to Oshun often contain jars of honey to remind us of the golden, viscous necessity for sweetness in our lives, Pattini's shrine holds alternatively water and fire, representing both the monsoon and the drought and their respective governance over the fortunes of rural communities. Like these altars, the sacred labor of Black and Brown women is a living, complex theory, a tangible interpretation of the divine. What would it mean then, to conceptualize the future of women-of-color feminism not wholly in the institutional language of coalition and allyship, but in the Black and Brown diasporic language of altars and community? What would it mean to build our women-of-color feminisms in the same way we build our altars to Yemoja, to Kali, to Oshun, to La Virgen, to our fallen foremothers?

My arrival at this question of altars was not a straightforward one, and in fact is most accurately likened to an ocean crossing or a navigation of many disparate rivers. When I first began to research the gendered impact of the Boxing Day tsunami in Sri Lanka I was in fact three continents and two oceans away from the island of my birth, studying the work of African diaspora women writers and finding in their theories and language a framework that finally offered something different, at once familiar and exciting. I found myself particularly drawn to the use of spiritual epistemologies in these

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<sup>58</sup> Lorde, Audre. *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Random House LLC, 2012. Print

texts - from Alexander to Sharon Bridgeforth to Omise'eke Tinsley - and how the spiritual functioned as a language for gender, race, sexuality, politics and history spoken by, for and to Black women, women of color and queers of color. For example, in the Orisha traditions of Santeria, Ifa, Lucumi and Candomble, and the Vodoun tradition, stories about the lwa and orisha, shared between women of African descent, archive the gendered and racialized diasporic realities of their worshippers on their own terms, and in a format that allows for the complexity and traumatic fissures of the transatlantic slave trade. The sound and shape of this complicatedly beautiful language was different from the spiritual languages of Sri Lanka, but there were places where the undercurrents ran together, where water made reflection and understanding possible.

To speak of women's experiences in the tsunami required me to test the imaginative limits of theory, to make allowance for something out of this world and incomprehensible, for how else would you describe a placid, sunny beach becoming, within minutes, a scene of apocalyptic disaster? And how could I speak of devastating waters and pitfalls of race and womanhood without also speaking of New Orleans and hurricane Katrina, a disaster that took place less than a year after the tsunami and that invited casual comparison between the two as a way of illuminating the lack of regard for Black life on the part of the United States government? The same government that quickly dispatched plane-loads of aid and supplies to South Asia, and the same media that lingered pityingly over the beaches of Hikkaduwa and Tamil Nadu, were reluctant, miserly and vicious when it came to a stadium full of Black refugees and lines of starving and homeless Black children. But another reality muddled the waters of the discourse of

anti-Blackness and neo-imperialism: that of gender, and specifically femininity. In both sites - whether it was Tamil women whose saris fatally slowed them down, or Black single mothers sheltering babies in the superdome and painted as irresponsible or worse by US media - gender was intimately wedded to the loss of life and the aftermath of displacement. The tsunami and the hurricane then were disasters that not only impacted vulnerable, third-world populations (its arguable that the aftermath of Katrina revealed little meaningful difference between “third” and “first” world when it comes to Blackness) but particular communities of Black and Brown women, third world women, women of color. As such, there was a conversation to be had here about women of color feminisms, about what languages we can use between, for and to each other, about how to bridge the figurative and literal oceanic gaps between these two sites that, for all their disparateness, haunted me with similarity. And so I offer the possibility of an altar located at the precarious juncture of femininity and stormwater, a juncture that gapes fleetingly wide during moments of crisis to reveal complex histories of gendered race and disaster.

If race, gender and femininity are most urgently contested and transformed at moments of social crisis, then theorizing the femininities of Black and Brown women must first entail delving into the depths of colonial histories to identify those illuminating ruptures, and any altar consecrated to them must hold or invoke pieces of those histories. Omise’eke Tinsley refers to the Black Atlantic as a “mirror that mirrors queerly”, locating crucial formulations and reformulations of Black genders and sexualities in the

trauma of the Middle-Passage<sup>59</sup>. The bite of salt water and the ooze of sick and dying captive bodies, thrown violently together by the machinations of chattel slavery, thus become birthing sites of gender, race and sexuality. In Sri Lanka, the ravages of civil war and the economic arrangements inherited from colonialism were refracted and magnified in the queer mirror of tsunami waters. Women's traditional long hair was caught in barbed wire army fences, while the unusually high number of Swedish casualties pointed to the ugly reality of European sex tourism on Sri Lanka's coveted beaches<sup>60</sup>. I argue that these junctures of watery history and contemporary trauma require us to consciously and carefully tend the altars of communal grief while also invoking memory, prayer and resistance. If our queer feminisms of color become searingly visible in these ruptures of time and place and water, what shape do they take, how are they embodied, and how do they then become "pedagogies of crossing", conversations across and through difference?

Water both literally and metaphorically marks important interventions in the history of queer, women-of-color scholarship. From The Combahee River Collective to Pedagogies of Crossing, water has functioned as witness, storyteller, conjurer and tool. Alexander, writing about *This Bridge Called my Back* ( a title which alludes to the presence of a body of water), notes "*Bridge* was both anchor and promise...a way that would provide the moorings for that kind of consciousness."<sup>61</sup> while Tinsley reminds us that "our challenge is to be like the ocean: spreading outward, running through bays and

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<sup>59</sup> Tinsley

<sup>60</sup> *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media. Web. 4 May 2015.

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/sex-tourists-prey-on-sri-lankas-children-beach-resorts-are-huntinggrounds-for-european-child-abusers-and-pornographic-video-makers-tim-mcgirk-reports-from-colombo-1407820.html>>

<sup>61</sup> Alexander, 260



fingers, while remaining heavy, stinging, a force against our hands.”<sup>62</sup> While both these theorists are invested in the cartographic possibilities and histories of ocean water for Black queer lives, they are also attentive to crosscurrents, the “fold” of water within water and history within history.<sup>63</sup> What does it mean for those of us invoking waterstories that “the ocean obscures all origins” even as the vicissitudes of our historical moment make it “politically, emotionally and spiritually necessary for women of color to return to their geographies of origin”?<sup>64</sup><sup>65</sup>

In Sri Lanka there are two women whose bodies symbolize the beginning of nationhood. One, Viharamahadevi, miraculously rescued from tsunami waves centuries before the 2004 tsunami, would become a symbol of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation and mother of its conquering heroes<sup>66</sup>. The other, Kuveni, golden enchantress by the seashore, was betrayed by the very king and country her powers helped secure, and fell into ignominy<sup>67</sup>. Respectively shored up and subsumed according to the needs of the patriarchal nation-state and marooned on opposite shores by the Sinhala-Tamil divide, these women remind us that the slippage between womanness and water is often dangerous and beyond their control, and carries implications that resonate through centuries: the children of Viharamahadevi are lauded as the true inheritors of the island, while Kuveni’s are cursed with bringing strife and war. As a Sinhalese woman working in the global north theorizing the work of a diasporic Tamil poet, tracing my

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<sup>62</sup> Tinsley, 212

<sup>63</sup> Alexander, 260

<sup>64</sup> Tinsley, 192

<sup>65</sup> Alexander, 268

<sup>66</sup> Muller, Carl. *Children of the Lion*. New Delhi, India: Viking, 1997. Print.

<sup>67</sup> Muller, 105

“geographies of origin” means recognizing where Viharamahadevi’s gilded boat and Kuveni’s seashore fold into each other to produce particular gendered and racialized temporalities. In New Orleans, contradiction, complexity and power coalesce around the figure of Marie Laveau, whose weeping ghost was seen wandering the French Quarter in the aftermath of the hurricane, whose time-stained tomb is decorated with offerings and prayers, and whose final resting place was rumored to be the Superdome when hurricane winds plummeted and dented the roof with their wrath. While the story about the Superdome has since been debunked, the dome itself was thrust into historical waters during the hurricane, when hundreds of poor, Black women, men, children and elders took precarious shelter within its walls. And it is this site, overlapping with historical traumas and contemporary materialities, that hosts *Denise Moore’s Story*. In the case of both Piepzna-Samarasinha and Moore, their work hints at diasporic waterscapes of origin that queer linearities of easy belonging, prompting us to think creatively like the river, and deeply like the ocean, about what our women of color feminism truly means. And in the end I am less concerned with myths of origin than I am with crosscurrents and confluences, the riverine history of women of color navigating treacherous landscapes and unfamiliar shores in each other’s company, the rush where ocean embraces river, where Yemoja and Oshun, mothers and daughters, sisters and lovers, meet after unimaginable journeys. Make no mistake, this water work, this river and ocean work, is first and foremost work, requiring intention, love, resistance, memory, struggle and honesty. But like the river and ocean “we must continue yearning for each other’s company”, and keep using our altars to create spaces of mutual understanding and

respect, recognizing and honoring difference while holding space for togetherness. An altar can mark where we've been, where we are and where we've yet to dream of travelling. Water marks these too.

Moore's poetic prose in *Denise's Story* does not directly reference altars or sacred memory, no, but is rooted in damp, desperate, feverish materiality that dredges up specific histories that, just like Denise's voice, are only alive in stories; specifically, the (his)story of the Middle Passage and that first "unstable confluence of race, nationality, sexuality, and gender... [the] wateriness [that] is metaphor, and history too."<sup>68</sup> But before Black bodies were transported across, thrown in, and chattelized at sea, they were hunted across miles of homeland turned suddenly hostile. Denise Moore's story begins then with a resonant out-of-placeness, a fearful search for refuge that calls to mind Saidiya Hartman's reimagining of Ghanaian fugitives escaping slave traders: "Predatory states produced migrants and fugitives as well as slaves. Those on the run sought asylum in out-of-the-way places that offered suitable defense like rocky hillsides or they built walled towers or they hid in caves or they relocated to lagoons or mountainous terrain or anywhere else that appeared impervious."<sup>69</sup> Denise Moore seeks shelter in "out of the way" places too, in the hospital where her mother works as a nurse, in her mother's small apartment that collapses and nearly kills her, and finally at the Ernest Memorial Convention Center along with hundreds of other working class Black women, men, children and elderly. The out-of-the-way character of each space is not about a geography

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<sup>68</sup> Tinsley, 192

<sup>69</sup> Hartman, 211

of escape, but one of entrapment. If the fugitives in colonial Ghana fled further and further from a seemingly inevitable fate, then Denise Moore and her family were forced into spaces not of their choosing and denied escape. That Denise thought she would “die from either the storm or a heart attack” evinces a feeling of huntedness without and within, a feeling engendered by a historically produced materiality. The storm passed at last, and Denise and her family survived the day, but then the levees broke, and history came pouring out.

Invocations of the Middle-Passage abound in writings about Katrina. In *When the Center is on Fire: Passionate Social Theory for our Times*, Diane Harriford and Becky Thompson theorize historical memory in the context of hurricane-wrecked New Orleans:

“parallels between the current crisis and the Middle Passage began to haunt us. The images of water - the muddy water, the out-of-control water, the water in which people were drowning, the water carrying bodies, the water covering disappeared bodies - looked like the same water Africans saw while on ships from Africa. The Katrina disaster looked like another ocean of death right out of the centuries of the slave trade from Africa to the Americas.”<sup>70</sup>

Water here has the power to remember and to remind violently, not through the expansive function of metaphor but through brute materiality, welling up realities that disturb our conceptions of progressive temporality. If it was in saltwater that African bodies first became “black” and “chattel” and “socially dead” then what do the churning,

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<sup>70</sup> Harriford, Diane Sue, and Becky W. Thompson. *When the Center Is on Fire Passionate Social Theory for Our times*. Austin: U of Texas, 2008. Print.

resurging waters of the ocean recollect, and what do they charge us with doing?<sup>71</sup> And if “the ocean obscures all origins” even as we take up Alexander’s charge to retrace our “geographies of origin”, then what of the moments when our being and un-being flow violently together? What do we when the waters that echo with traces of our identity also float with the bones of our ancestors?

We tell the stories and gather the bones. Like cowrie shells cast by Yoruba diviners - smooth hollow circles of bone that “speak” with the voice of the orishas - or the shells gathered on altars to Yemoja and La Sirene, the present can echo with voices of the past, and offer guidance about the future. In *The Site of Memory*, Toni Morrison writes about the Mississippi River flooding the places it was diverted from that “‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be.”<sup>72</sup> And as the waters of the Mississippi Gulf, carried on hurricane winds that follow trade routes surge through New Orleans, a city whose port-side commerce and flourishing slave markets earned it the reputation of an interracial sex hub, memory and history re-inscribe themselves on bodies of young women like Denise.<sup>73</sup> NPR reporter John Burnett described sexual violence in the wake of Katrina as “storm-related sexual assaults”, invoking (however unintentionally) the elemental power of historicized brutality against Black female bodies.<sup>74</sup> While Denise doesn’t report sexual violence against her, she nevertheless recounts the “liquidation of their social selves” that

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<sup>71</sup> Smallwood, Stephanie E. *Saltwater Slavery a Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2008. Print.123

<sup>72</sup> Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the truth: The art and craft of memoir* (1987): 101-24.

<sup>73</sup> Landau, Emily Epstein. *Spectacular Wickedness Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2013. Print.

<sup>74</sup> "More Stories Emerge of Rapes in Post-Katrina Chaos." *NPR*. NPR. Web. 4 May 2015. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5063796>>.

transpired when the levees broke, when the waters engulfed them in a history that never seemed to recede<sup>75</sup>. Describing the inside of the convention center, Denise said “the place was one huge bathroom. In order to shit, you had to stand in other people's shit. The floors were black and slick with shit. Most people stayed outside because the smell was so bad. But outside wasn't much better between the heat, the humidity, the lack of water, the old and very young dying from dehydration... and there was no place to lay down, not even room on the sidewalk.”<sup>76</sup> Here the ooze and effluvia of trapped, Black bodies evoke the pus, blood and fluid that slicked the floor of slave-ships, overflows that become “sites of colonization”.<sup>77</sup> While Tinsley invokes the work of Ana-Maurine Lara as performing a Black queer oceanic re-membering, I suggest that Moore does similar work here with *Denise Moore's Story*, rescuing the voice of a young Black woman that drags us through a muddy, fraught, shit-slick, ocean-drowned, never-meant-to-survive geography of origin to affirm that this woman's voice, like the voices of cowries/bones, not only matters, but tells us something about the past, the present and possible implied futures.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha also swims between separate and interlocking timelines in *sweet water*, 3/9/03, the last poem in her first published volume of poetry, *Consensual Genocide*<sup>78</sup>. Opening with a quote from the Biblical *Song of Songs*, the poem then immediately invokes an altar with “I am pouring sweet water on my altar for you/ praying that this prayer matters.” The “you” is not specified, but functions rather as a personalized, intimate address to the women of Iraq. I want to pause here and

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<sup>75</sup> Tinsley, 199

<sup>76</sup> Moore

<sup>77</sup> Tinsley, 199

<sup>78</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, 64

acknowledge a specific history of women of color feminism that rises in the “you”. The implied closeness, the intimacy of that address calls to the landmark *This Bridge Called my Back* that saw Black and Brown women conversing with each other across the axes of racialized and gendered oppression. This conversation was evident in two ways: in the comrade/friendship of editors Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga who shared openly their reasons for compiling the anthology, and in the content of the anthology itself, where letters, poems, essays and prayers weave quiltlike between identity and space, talking with and *to* each other through this phrase “women of color.”<sup>79</sup> In the preface to the fourth edition, Cherrie Moraga, now bereft of many of her *companeras*, says this about the briefly dazzling moment when *Bridge* came into being: “those first ruptures of *consciencia* where we turned and looked at one another across culture, color and class difference to share an origin story of displacement in a nation never fully home to us.”<sup>80</sup> The geographies of origin that Piepzna-Samarasinha maps are transnational, diasporic lineages of belonging and unbelonging as muddy as the shit-stained floors of a New Orleans convention center, as vital and riverine as the back-roads that Denise and her friends used to escape.

But before I continue tracing the map of this particular poem, a few words are warranted about the poem’s location within the cartography of the collection. Piepzna-Samarasinha includes several poems about Sri Lanka and about the tsunami, but this last poem synthesizes and distills the kind of woman of color feminist praxis that I want to discuss here. While poems like *landmine heart* and *tsunami song* explicitly reference the

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<sup>79</sup> *This Bridge Called My Back Writings by Radical Women of Color*. State Univ of New York Pr, 2015. Print.

<sup>80</sup> IBID 24

wave and the poet's reaction to it, I suggest that the nature of the wave itself, its brute, seemingly inevitable capacity to destroy hope and life, echoes in descriptions of the US invasion of Iraq. Just like the tsunami, it is women and children who are uniquely impacted by the war, and death and destruction fall along classed and gendered lines. And just as the shit-muddied floors of a New Orleans convention center call up memories of slave-holds where Black bodies sweltered and died, the similarity in impact between a towering ocean wave and waves of carpet-bombs remind us that "natural" and "man-made" disasters have no easy distinctions. The same forces of patriarchy and neo-imperialism that heightened Sri Lankan women's vulnerability to the tsunami twistedly positioned Iraqi women as the benefactors of US military invasion even while their lives were destroyed and uprooted.

The invasion of Iraq by the United States armed forces in 2003 was a maelstrom of feminist controversy. The rhetoric of "oppressed" Iraqi women requiring American liberation drew its power from the nexus of Islamophobia, orientalism, nationalism and neo-imperialism to conjure a distant, desert land under barbaric control where women are little more than property, nevermind that the George W. Bush presidency saw some of the most restrictive anti-abortion, anti-welfare and anti-sex education legislation enacted since the Reagan-Bush administration of the 80's, in addition to the egregious mishandling of hurricane Katrina. The toxicity of this political landscape was such that even discourses of feminism were diverted and co-opted for the purposes of empire. The choking dust of 9/11 had barely cleared before Operation Iraqi Freedom opened fire and



death over Iraqis, killing over 90,000 civilians over the course of five years.<sup>81</sup> In this “world on fire”, even the sweet waters of Brown and Black women’s feminism sometimes threatens to run dry, as Piepzna-Samarasinha writes “take my seven day candle out to recycling/ cause none of it/ did/ shit.”<sup>82</sup> The poem then narrates a sense of helpless anger as the speaker, “staring into the computer at work” sees “scorched air rising from Baghdad” and “bombs with wings like small butterflies/ seeking a seven-year-old’s head/ a mother’s swollen belly”. This stanza parallels an earlier poem, *tsunami song*, where the speaker joins other diasporic Sri Lankans in watching footage of post-tsunami Sri Lanka. Electrified by the digital age, diasporic connections pulse with a new kind of immediacy that is both sobering and generative: now more than ever the core of women-of-color feminist praxis, “feeling and feeling for” each other, becomes possible<sup>83</sup>.

With the candle of hope extinguished and the invasion underway, the poem seems poised for a defeatist kind of cynicism. But then, the speaker writes, “my cervix pinches with cramps/ I feel this shit blowing up my womb.” This explosive, painful empathy maps a theoretical geography, yes - what Gloria Anzaldua called “theory-in-the-flesh”, what Audre Lorde recognized as “the erotic” - but also one of transnational, transracial memory, from the chattelized, mutilated, forcibly-sterilized wombs of Black women, to the violently forestalled and stolen motherhood of Tamil women in Piepzna-Samarasinha’s native Sri Lanka, winding here to the “fresh c-section scars of the women/

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<sup>81</sup> “The Weapons That Kill Civilians - Deaths of Children and Noncombatants in Iraq, 2003–2008 — NEJM.” *New England Journal of Medicine*. Web. 5 May 2015. <<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp0807240>>.

<sup>82</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha 64

<sup>83</sup> Tinsley, 192

who rushed to give birth/ before the bombing started.” This is a turning point in the poem from despair to fervent prayer, and a “blowing up” of neoliberal constructions of feminism through the fierce, painful, necessary, pulsing current of women of color “feeling and feeling for” each other.

This “feeling” is not purely sentimental or purely poetic, but rooted in decades of women of color/ third world feminists “yearning for each other’s company.”<sup>84</sup> And it is yearning, not nativity or patriarchal genealogy, that throbs capillary-like through Piepzna-Samarsinha’s geography of origin, from a struggling abortion clinic where she works as a doula, to working class neighborhoods of color in Toronto where Tamil refugees rub shoulders with poor whites and Black queer sex workers, to the far-flung Tamil diaspora connected by a bleeding network of memories, to Sri Lanka, *illankai*, the teardrop island consumed with civil war, and finally to Iraq, where a new generation of women braces for fire and death. This yearning, this feeling, stretches deeper still, rooted in lived experience, from Piepzna-Samarasinha’s family fleeing the racial riots of 1983 that left thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils dead at the hands of their countrymen, to her flight from an abusive mother, then an abusive partner, and finally her flight *with* and *to* other queers of color evading the tentacles of gentrification and police brutality.<sup>85</sup> But this feeling and yearning also exacts a deadly price. In her 2008 essay *The Future of our Worlds: Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University Under Globalization*, Grace Kyungwon Hong remembers Black feminist foremothers like Barbara Christian, June

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<sup>84</sup> Alexander

<sup>85</sup> “Black July 1983 Remembered.” *Black July 1983 Remembered*. Web. 5 May 2015.  
<<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=11617>>.

Jordan, Audre Lorde and others whose early deaths belie the promise of the liberal university. For these foremothers, breaking ground and theorizing in the flesh brought illness and premature death; Alexander dedicates a chapter in her work to their memory, as does Cherrie Moraga in both the new edition of *Bridge* and her own newer work *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010*. And while altars to women of color feminist foremothers abound in scholarly and creative work by women of color, other lives and other voices lie in smaller graves, or rest uneasily at the bottom of the sea. While I write about Piepzna-Samarasinha’s work, I also bring another memory to the altar, that of Sri Lankan Tamil poet Sivaramani. A member of the Poorani Women’s Center in Jaffna that sheltered victims of rape and sexual abuse in the war-ravaged north, Sivaramani was also a poet, and a single published poem, *Wartime*, about the transgenerational impact of war and terror on children, is all that remains of her work that she burned before committing suicide.<sup>86</sup> To be “refugees from a world on fire” is no easy basis for a women-of-color feminism, and the work of C. Moore and Piepzna-Samarasinha reminds us that our geographies of origin traverse fire and water, life and death. I am pouring sweet water on my altar for you, Sivaramani akka, and for all the stories that died with you.

The closing stanza of Piepzna-Samarasinha’s poem returns us to the altar-space with “But no, I’m not marching to the consulate today/ I stay home light another candle/ I don’t have any gun to fight them with/ except my tongue my heart”. Despite the denotation, this is not a laying down of arms, or even picking up a different kind of

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<sup>86</sup> Samuel, Kumudini. *A Hidden History: Women's Activism for Peace in Sri Lanka 1982-2002*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2006. Print.

weapon, but a re-routing of the very terms of resistance itself to the pulsing, riverine history that is not only women of color activism and protest, but brown and Black women's deep love and feeling for themselves and each other. The work of the "tongue" and "heart" is the work of *This Bridge Called my Back*, the work of *Pedagogies of Crossing*, the work of the *Combahee River Collective*, the work of Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa and Chandra Mohanty, the work of the Poorani Women's Center, and yes, the work of Sivaramani too: to bear witness, to "remember, recognize and yearn", to build each altar word by word, bone by bone, drop by precious drop. And in the Yoruba pantheon, it is Oshun, deity of "sweet water" and love, who undertakes the dangerous journey to the abode of Olodumare the Creator to plead for the earth and its children. During the journey Oshun's beautiful peacock plumage is scorched off as she soars high into the heavens so that she reaches God's feet as a vulture, stripped of her famous beauty but blazing still with the honeyed power of her heart and tongue. Ifa scripture continually warns against underestimating Oshun, relating story after story of her power - embodied in the life-giving river, the mirror and honey, the power of self-love and the erotic in its highest, most potent form - intervening to save the world from itself. It's no mistake that Piepzna-Samarasinha evokes Oshun's power here, and with sweet water repurposes Audre Lorde's *Litany for Survival* into "survivors survive/ whether they want us to/ or not."<sup>87</sup> Like Oshun Ibu Kole the vulture, the poet emerges through water and fire with her tongue and heart unflagged, remembering and reminding us of the transformative, flowing, difficult love that has nourished women of color's work for generations. Oshun,

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<sup>87</sup> Lorde

the spirit that cleans you inside out, bathes the speaker's altar, drenching us with the complicated, vital reality of continuing to exist, to fight, to speak.

And as I reached the end of this essay, a post surfaced on my Facebook feed that re-routed this conclusion into another watery site of fraught crossings, this one about migrants crossing from Libya and Eritrea to the Italian island of Lampedusa on ill-equipped fishing boats, drowning in the hundreds in a desperate attempt to find political asylum in Europe<sup>88</sup>. I read news article after news article, consumed with horror and grief and realizing that those lives lost in the Mediterranean Sea were demanding an epigraph here, between the lines of Black and brown women singing their love and holding each other through a world on fire. The migrants who died mere miles from Lampedusa, and the few who survived, challenged me to imagine a woman-of-color feminist praxis that could remember them and remember the continuing necessity of mapping all our geographies of origin. And so in the spirit of Viharamahadevi and Marie Laveau, Yemoja and Oshun, Sivaramani and Denise Moore, of Anzaldúa and Lorde, of the nameless and countless that perished in the Atlantic, the thousands that burned in Jaffna and Iraq, I want to end by remembering Kisanet, a girl who left Libya and never came back.

Her name appears just once, in a news story on *The Guardian's* website, as best friends to a girl named Fanus. Fanus "survived" the capsizing of their boat but is then forced to navigate the treacherous waters of Italian and Swedish immigration policy. Kisanet, meanwhile, presumably drowned with over 300 other people when the small, diesel-fueled vessel capsized mere miles from the coast of Lampedusa. Kisanet, whose

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<sup>88</sup> "Lampedusa Migrant Boat Capsizes: Live Updates as 700 Feared Dead." *Mirror*. 19 Apr. 2015. Web. 5 May 2015. <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/lampedusa-migrant-boat-capsizes-recap-5546924>>.

name means tranquility, went down into those deep waters, taking her stories, her memories, her tongue, her heart. I have no resources here to write Kisanet's story or to re-imagine her, nor am I entirely sure I should. Saidiya Hartman encounters a similar dilemma in *Venus in Two Acts*, wherein she asks us to consider: what does it mean to recover and reimagine lives that are "visible only in the moment of their disappearance"?<sup>89</sup> I invoke Kisanet's name with no illusions of redress or restoration, but rather to echo one of the questions that began this essay: what can women-of-color feminism make of geographies of origin that empty into the sea?

I have no way of knowing what Kisanet believed, what gods or spirits rose to her lips when the water closed over her eyes, who she cried for and who cries for her. As it stands I don't even know her last name. All I/we know is, her name was Kisanet, and that along with her best friend Fanus she boarded a small fishing vessel in Libya to cross the Mediterranean into Italy. How and when they became "best friends" is also up for debate, since the journey from Eritrea to Libya is a geography of war, exploitation, rape and trafficking. Here is a part of Fanus' journey:

To reach the North African coast, Fanus had used a people-smuggling route fraught with danger. She had been arrested when attempting to flee the country before; this time, she got across the border, but was kidnapped while crossing the Sahara on the way to Libya. "They abducted us and kept us at the foot of a sand dune for 20 days. The boys were tied up by their feet and the kidnappers beat their soles with some kind of rubber stick. They

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<sup>89</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 1-14. *Project MUSE*. Web. 7 Oct. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.

demanded sexual favours from the girls, and if we refused, they would douse us with petrol." While torturing their captives, the kidnappers forced them to call their relatives and beg for help. Fanus said: "My parents sold everything they had to raise the money – \$3,400 [£2,049]. That's how I paid my way out."<sup>90</sup>

Was Kisanet with her at the foot of that sand dune? Did they comfort each other after sexual violence, after nightmares soaked with the stench of petrol? Did they know each other before the time of flight, or was theirs a friendship cemented on being “refugees from a world on fire”? And all speculation aside, why was it so important to Fanus that Kisanet be remembered as her “best friend”? Making no claims on their behalf here, I wish only to recognize them within a lineage of Black and Brown women holding each other through fire and water.

The Lampedusa shoreline is fast gaining worldwide attention as a site of unimaginable tragedy, with the most recent migrant vessel to have capsized believed to have carried over 600 passengers, most of whom are as yet unaccounted for. While the prime minister of Malta lambasted the human smugglers for exploiting desperate people, and the European Union condemned human trafficking, the hundreds of lives lost in the crossing pose a question as haunting, as quietly gaping as those calm Mediterranean waters where Kisanet breathed her last: what of those people bleeding through the borders of nation-states, uprooted or driven out or stolen from safety, whose easiest welcome remains no human vessel or country but the deep blue depths of the sea? “To

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<sup>90</sup>Web. 5 May 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/22/lampedusa-boat-tragedy-migrants-africa>>.

whom do I flee and where?” Alexander asks in *Pedagogies*, and I repeat her query here: to whom do they flee, and where?

In her reading of Ana-Maurine Lara’s work, Tinsley focuses on yola-board companions Miriam and Marcela, who in their journey across the dangerous Mona Strait “queerly” mirror the journey of two lovers thrown overboard during the Middle Passage<sup>91</sup>. I am not suggesting an easy equivalence between the Lampedusa boat disasters and the Middle Passage, just as I am not implying that Fanus and Kisanet are an exact mirror for Miriam and Marcela, but rather identifying overlaps in each geography of origin, sites where water and desire and women’s lives entwine darkly, queerly and suggestively. Unlike the “shark-infested Mona passage”, the relatively small strip of Mediterranean water separating Libya from Lampedusa is the ocean water of our dreams - blue and warm and lullabye-calm - and the beach that survivors were brought to is a popular spot for sunbathers. And yet, the nexus of “terror and pleasure” remaps itself once again on free white bodies soaking up the pleasure of sun and sand, and (un)free Black bodies sinking into terrifying blue depths<sup>92</sup>. Dredging up Kisanet’s name, and imagining all the ways she and Fanus connected on land and water, cannot restore that which defies restoration, cannot undo centuries of transoceanic suffering born and reborn in women of color’s bodies, but it can remind us that “this prayer matters”, that tongues and hearts continue to tell stories even after drowning, and that shipmates, cousins, best friends, you, and I can stand on the shores of a dream-like, insistent, ocean-deep legacy of women-of-color love, receiving open-armed “the sea-like capacity to desire beyond the brutality of

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<sup>91</sup> Tinsley, 200

<sup>92</sup> Hartman, 1



history, nationality, enslavement and immigration.”<sup>93</sup> In *Erzulie’s Skirt*, it is La Mar that luminescently embodies Black queer Atlantic, both for Miriam and Marcela and the enslaved lovers they double. Perhaps one day Fanus, or someone else, maybe even Kisanet herself, can tell us who she, Kisanet, cried to, what manner of altar she would like for her tongue and heart, how deep a young immigrant woman’s desire for freedom can churn, how those silver dreams still hover above the seafoam, waiting for a new boatful of hungry hearts and tongues. But until then I will say only: Kisanet, I am keeping a pot full of saltwater for you, not knowing if this prayer matters but praying anyway, Yemoja, mother of fish, keep safe the drowned and hold their dreams close, keep us singing and speaking beyond the reach of memory, Yemoja, yeye omo eja, mother whose children are fish, are countless, keep safe these tongues and hearts until at last they tremble, gather voice, and rush, thundering like laughter, to shore.

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<sup>93</sup> Tinsley, 201

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## **Vita**

Natassja Bindu Gunasena was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka. After moving to the United Arab Emirates at the age of nine, she graduated from Cambridge International High School before entering Minnesota State University Moorhead as a freshman in 2007. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English and Gender Studies from MSUM in 2011, and worked as an Admissions Counselor for the university until 2012. In the summer of 2012 she moved to Texas, where Gloria Anzaldúa's adoptive land welcomed her with open, challenging, transformative arms, and in fall 2013 she entered graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin.

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